In the Classroom/En classe

Formative Assessment Procedures and the Second Language Curriculum: Signposts for the Journey

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How teachers conceptualize classroom language learning is the result of many factors including cultural background, personality, teacher training, and experiences as a student. For some, the process is like a game of tennis: a series of exchanges between teacher and learners. For others language learning in the classroom is best described using the image of the traffic controller, with the teacher directing students toward greater proficiency through input and guidance. I find the metaphor that most clearly symbolizes the process of language learning in the classroom is the *journey*. In this construction the planned curriculum provides the path along which the students travel as independent learners, maintaining a pace determined by their personal goals and motivations. I consider it the role of teacher not to carry the learners through the course, but to ensure that they remain on track to achieve their goals. This conceptualization of the teacher's role as facilitator or guide raises a vital question: how can we adequately monitor each learner's progress while simultaneously performing the many other functions required of a language instructor? The answer lies in the use of planned formative assessment procedures. This article is written with the hope that others will benefit from conceptualizing formative assessment as a tool for signposting the journey of second-language learning.

What is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment of student learning is the monitoring of student progress throughout the duration of a course or unit of study (Graves, 2000; Brown, 1995, 1999). Like the signposts that mark out a journey, formative assessment procedures function to show learners how far they have progressed along the path toward acquisition of the target language. As a general rule, formative assessment is not used for gatekeeping or certification purposes, although occasionally it may be intertwined with summative procedures and used as both a means of checking students' progress and of calculating final grades (Brown & Pendlebury, 1992, cited in McAllister, 1999; Brown, 1999; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Print, 1987). However, in line with the Latin term *ad sere* meaning "to sit beside" from which the word

assessment is derived, formative assessment procedures provide learners with feedback and encouragement to increase motivation and build self-confidence as they travel along the journey of language acquisition (Brown, 1999).

Teachers tend to carry out formative assessment procedures extemporaneously in the classroom on a daily basis (Brindley, 1995). Whether checking student performance on a revision quiz, participation in a group conversation, or the completion of a given activity, teachers undertake unplanned formative assessment as an important means of monitoring student advancement. As Brown (1999) suggests, spontaneous classroom observation is a vital part of teaching and assessment. However, moving beyond unplanned monitoring of student progress and integrating scheduled formative assessment into the curriculum allows teachers to coordinate the administration and implementation of these evaluation measures, thereby enriching the quality and comprehensiveness of feedback.

The Benefits of Planned Formative Assessment

Every teacher must develop his or her own system for implementing formative assessment procedures in the classroom. The chosen method depends to some extent on the students' learning styles, the teacher's instructional approach, administrative considerations, and course constraints. After using a variety of techniques for planning and incorporating formative assessment procedures, I have discovered that compiling progress records is an enormously valuable system. It is an uncomplicated and inexpensive arrangement that enables maximum learner input and provides an efficient and effective means of monitoring student advancement.

At the beginning of each term, I provide the learners with folders in which to record important information. These are their progress records for the duration of the course and are housed in the classroom or staffroom, with a spare copy kept elsewhere. I encourage the students to articulate clearly and record their learning goals, along with the stated objectives of the course. This provides a checklist that may be revisited throughout the term as each target is reached. In practice I have found that many students identify affective rather than strictly linguistic goals, for example, "To have more confidence when using English in casual conversations." Such goals are clearly important for the learner's development as a user of the target language, and are therefore worthy of inclusion. However, I have discovered it necessary to discuss the issue of measuring or testing these sorts of goals with the students and generally find that they formulate their own instruments for checking attainment such as reflective journals.

Next, the results of needs analysis work and any other relevant information are included in the progress record, and in the course of the teaching term, samples of work, teacher notes, learner reflections, and the results of

formative assessment items are also recorded. Each student's progression toward the objectives of the course may therefore be systematically charted throughout the unit. I can then conduct feedback sessions with small groups or individuals in which the students are able to discuss their records, consider their progress, and receive teacher or peer input.

It is important that such formative assessment procedures provide learners with feedback at various stages in the acquisition process: something that summative assessment procedures are generally unable to do given that most are located at the end of a course (Cohen, 1994). Compiling accessible records of learner progress enables the teacher to target areas that require revision, allowing for the provision of assistance while the course is in progress. In this way the results of formative assessment inform ongoing teaching and course design, indicating whether modifications to the planned curriculum or instructional practices are required (Brown, 1995; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). I find that I am able to reorganize or modify the course in response to learner needs. The information regarding class learning that emerges from formative assessment tasks can be used as the basis for subsequent lessons, group activities, discussions, and planning sessions with the learners (Brown, 1999). Collating common strengths and weaknesses allows the teacher to present the class with a complete picture of the areas that have been mastered and those that require continued work.

In the past, assessment has often been thought of in terms of passing or failing a course, and as Brindley (1995) suggests, this view has often hindered student learning, contributing to a fear of failure that prevents risk-taking. The fact that formative assessment is not generally used for the allocation of a grade means that it may provide an opportunity for the student to receive assessment feedback in a nonthreatening situation. Marking criteria may be constructed in order to provide evidence of small advancements, and teachers may repeat formative assessment tasks in order to illustrate learner progress (Brown, 1999; Willis & Willis, 1996). This is an important means of building student confidence and sense of worth and encouraging a positive view of assessment. It is vital for teachers to have concrete evidence of improvement to motivate and encourage learners throughout their journey. My experience has shown that learners tend to take pride in their progress records and view them as a tangible reminder of their achievements.

Formative Assessment in the Classroom

Conducting formative assessment in the classroom need not be excessively time-consuming (Graves, 2000). There are many methods of incorporating progress checks into daily teaching that are both effective and time-efficient, and any planned activity that requires students to use the target language actively may be used to assess performance. The teacher may adopt a variety of tools for observing learner advancement ranging from written tasks, tests,

student seminars, and conferences, through to portfolios, presentations, and reading or listening comprehension activities. These may be carried out using formal or informal assessment procedures. I have found that by varying tasks, it is possible to appeal to different learning styles and to incorporate assessment located at various points along the authenticity continuum.

Once the objectives of the curriculum have been articulated and the course content outlined, teachers can begin to include formative assessment items throughout the overall plan, scheduling these for key points in the learning journey (Graves, 2000; Spruck Wrigley, 1992). It is useful to articulate course objectives into manageable groups and plan to test these at appropriate times throughout the course. It is also important to schedule enough time between formative assessment items to allow for learner progress. The teacher may wish to divide the class into groups at the beginning of the course or during the curriculum planning stage to coordinate formative assessment tasks at various times throughout the program (Brown, 1999). I find that involving the learners in this stage of course planning is particularly valuable. Discussing course objectives with the learners and encouraging them to negotiate a realistic time frame in which to schedule formative assessment procedures gives the learners a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Encouraging learners to construct their own formative assessment instruments to test the progress of their classmates may consolidate this sense of involvement. The assessment process may be further streamlined by developing methods for completing marking in class time (Brown, 1999). Being involved in the formulation of assessment procedures and the collation of results provides students with valuable opportunities to become active in planning future instruction and determining the direction of the course (Brown, 1999; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). This encourages autonomous learning and self-assessment and enables greater student awareness of instructional goals and objectives (Nunan, 1988; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). This has important ramifications for enabling student to monitor their own use of language outside the classroom (Nunan, 1988). When transparent criteria are used, the incorporation of formative assessment procedures may assist learners gradually to develop an ability to identify their own areas of strength and weakness, resulting in a greater capacity for self-correction (Cohen, 1994). As Valencia (1990, cited in Brown, 1999) asserts, "It is when students and teachers are collaboratively involved in assessment that the greatest benefit is achieved" (p. 12).

Conclusion

The incorporation of formative assessment procedures into the overall curriculum design is central to maintaining effective instructional practices,

improving learner outcomes, and ensuring that the course remains responsive to student requirements. A curriculum is only as good as its ability to serve the needs of the learners. Without formative assessment procedures to inform curricular modifications continually, a language program may well be in danger of losing its impetus. The journey must be signposted.

The Author

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